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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

National parliamentary elections will be held on October 23, 2011 in Switzerland. These elections, along with elections at the sub-national level as well as in other political systems, are key objects of CIS research. Elections are also a core element in the various courses of study CIS members supervise. Various research groups, using divergent perspectives, ask questions about electoral behavior and the significance of elections for political development in differing political systems. The upcoming Swiss national elections provide an occasion for some of the research projects currently running at the CIS to present their work in this CIS News.

Two distinctive features of Swiss elections are worth noting, particularly in an international context. One is that elections to the national parliament in Switzerland carry less weight than in other political systems. This is connected to two key institutional characteristics of Switzerland: federalism and direct democracy. Switzerland's distinctively federalist governmental structure means that numerous, and significant, political decisions are not taken at the national but rather at the cantonal and community level. Direct democracy, through popular initiatives and referenda over substantive issues, also means parliamentary elections have less substantive relevance (and thus have lower voter

participation rates) than in representative systems. One can say, loosely, that national elections as such don't even really exist in Switzerland: they are at heart only the sum of 26 cantonal elections. In the case of elections to the lower house (Nationalrat), these follow uniformity rules and take place on the same date; in the case of elections to the upper house (Ständerat), the cantons themselves set the rules. Even today, elections to both houses are decided in cantonal political arenas.

The outcome of the elections can nevertheless be eagerly awaited. In my view, two questions are key, both of which pose challenges for the future of the Swiss party system. This fall will decide whether the unprecedented success of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), which has been on the rise since 1991, will continue. The recent electoral success of more recent parties, notably the Green Liberals (GLP) and the Conservative Democrats (BDP), will be of particular interest, not least because they will exert a decisive influence on the (re-) election of the Federal Council, slated for December of 2011.

Enjoy the reading !

Thomas Widmer *

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About CIS:

The Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS) was founded in 1997 and is based in Zurich, Switzerland. The CIS is a joint venture of two universities: the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) and the University of Zurich. It includes around a dozen faculty members (political scientists, economists, historians) and about 150 PhD students, postdoctoral researchers and other scientific and administrative staff from the ETH Zurich's Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, and the University of Zurich's Institute of Political Science.

The purpose of the CIS is to create synergies and foster cooperation in research and education.